GUIDE TO THE OJ13 KWOMA FILE

[The Kwoma are a mountain dwelling people living on the Peilungua Mountains in New Guinea, north of the Sepik River, and some 265 miles from its delta. The Peilungua Mountain system encompasses not more than twenty square miles in area and is bounded on the south and west by the Sepik River in conjunction with a lake created by a former oxbow in the river, and on the east and north by the vast Sepik watershed area which stretches to the foothills of the coastal range. The Kwoma are surrounded by swamp and river tribes, such as the Amiki, Sowal, Yelagu, Malu, Yambon, and Yessan.

The Kwoma were divided into four sub-groups, the Tangwishamp, the Urumbanj, the Koriasi and the Hongwam. The Hongwam were the focus of Whiting's study which makes up the bulk of this file. Each of the sub-groups occupied contiguous territories, spoke the same language and were generally bound together by ties of trade and intermarriage, and yet each maintained a certain distinct social identity which allowed one sub-group to carry on head-hunting raids against another. On occasion these sub-groups would band together for raids against other non-Kwoma people. Each sub-group was divided into several hamlets, most of which were clustered around a men's ceremonial lodge or "house tamberan." The hamlet frequently took its name from its "house tamberan." Within each hamlet dwellings were arranged according to the hereditary arrangement of land and the scarcity of level sites because of the precipitous nature of the slopes on which the village was built.

The primary descent group among the Kwoma was the patrilineal sib to which all male members of a hamlet belonged.

It should be noted, however, that the hamlets belonging to a specific sib did not necessarily occupy contiguous territory. Each sib was further divided into lineages composed of several family lines who traced descent from a common grandfather. The male members of the lineage build their dwellings in a cluster within the hamlet. The achievement of status and prestige in the society was a dominant cultural goal among the Kwoma. The attainment of status and prestige was accomplished primarily through individual means such as skill in dancing, singing, playing the gongs, sexual exploits, and warfare. In the Kwoma Yam Cult, which was divided into three sections, the Yenama, Minjama, and Nokwi, every adolescent boy was elected to either the Yenama or Minjama division, while young men of special promise were often elected to both. These two sections closely approximated a moiety-type organization and were referred to as such in 2: Whiting, p. 225. The Nokwi section was the highest stage of the cult to which only men of the greatest prestige who had taken a head in a raid were elected.

The Kwoma language was, according to Voegelin, of an unclassified linguistic stock. It was, however, spoken by some 2,231 speakers north of the Middle Sepik River.

Information on Kwoma population is rather scanty; however, Whiting does give a figure of approximately 898 individuals for the entire group broken down as follows: Hongwam, 374; Koriasi, 116; Urumbanj, 108; and Tangwishamp, circa 300 (1: Whiting, p. 5).

Kwoma religious beliefs centered around the marsalai -- huge monsters in the form of snakes or crocodiles which

caused rain and wind storms, earthquakes, and other cosmic phenomena. Supposedly they were present at ceremonies of the Yam Cult and were responsible for a plentiful supply of that crop. In addition to the marsalai the Kwoma believed in ghosts which were conceived of as spirits of the dead living on the outskirts of the tribal territory. They appeared as invisible shadows or as birds or other animals and sometimes visited the hamlets of the living, particularly at night or when a death had occurred. The Kwoma were in a constant state of anxiety about sorcery and conceived of it as the primary cause of all serious illness, as well as certain minor ills such as ulcers, headaches, or upset stomachs. Sorcerers were sought out and killed or ostracized from the community. Religious ceremonials were centered in the rituals of the Yam Cult, previously mentioned, which functioned not only in the agricultural cycle but also as a means of ranking men in accordance with their attainments, as a way of gaining the support of the marsalai and as a primary institution for artistic expression (young men were taught to play the gongs, sing, dance, etc.).

The primary subsistence pattern was based on agriculture and hunting and supplemented somewhat by the gathering of certain leaves used as greens, grubs and wild fruits, and by fish which were obtained primarily in trade with the river tribes. Fishing itself was of little importance to the Kwoma who generally considered it as a sport. Agriculture was based chiefly on the growing of yams and supplemented by taro, spinach, bananas, and plantains. Some tobacco was also grown. The agricultural work was performed by a cooperative work group composed of the man who needed the help and those of his relatives who were willing to help him in return for the feast that he and his wife had to provide for them. Dogs were kept by almost all Kwoma families and used in hunting, and sometimes as food. When a sow was killed during the hunt, her suckling pigs were carried back to the village and raised as future source of food.

Marriages were arranged by a boy's parents after a discussion with the parents of the girl. However as a prerequisite a boy must first have had to undergo the ceremony which, from the standpoint of Kwoma society, marked him as an adult, while the girl who was generally slightly younger than the boy, must be pubescent. She must also have been of a sib different than that of the boy and not closely related to his mother's brother's, mother's sister, father's sister, siter's husband, wife, friend, or ceremonial father (1: Whiting, p. 81). Adolescent courtship generally culminated in a trial marriage wherein the girl went to live with the boy's parents. During the period of betrothal a mutal exchange of gifts took place so that if the engagement should be broken, neither family was the loser. If the relationship was found to be agreeable, a special ceremony took place in which the couple become united as man and wife. The man then built his own home on a plot of land near his father's house.

Head hunting raids were often carried out against neighboring groups, although open warfare was infrequent. These raids provided the most frequently employed means of expressing aggression toward a foreigner as well as serving as a means of obtaining prestige in the society. It will be remembered, for example, that no man was eligible to join the Nokwi, the highest grade of the Yam Cult, until he had taken a head in warfare.

The Kwoma kinship system was of the Omaha type. Parallel cousins were all classed as siblings while cross-cousins were called "mother" or "maternal uncle" if they were related through the mother (mother's brother's children) and "nephew" if they were related through the father (father's sister's children). Age distinctions were made between siblings of the same sex but not between siblings of the opposite sex. Similar distinctions were made between parallel

cousins. In the parental generation father and his brothers were called "father", "younger uncle", and "elder uncle", while father's sisters were called by a single term "paternal aunt." In the same manner mother's sisters were classed as "younger aunt" and "elder aunt", while her brothers were termed "maternal uncle". Grandparents were simply designated as "paternal grandparent" or "maternal grandparent". Relations above the grandparent level were referred to as merely "ancestors". For further details of Kwoma kinship terminology see 1: Whiting, pp. 7-8.

The Kwoma file consists of two sources, both in English and both written by a well-known professional anthropologist who spent nine months in the field among these people from September 1936 to May 1937. 1: Whiting is the major source for this file and concentrates primarily on the socialization processes of the Kwoma. Concurrent with his main theme, the author also presents an abundance of additional data pertinent to other aspects of the culture (e.g., agriculture, age grade ceremonies, raiding activities, kinship, marriage, etc.). Certain limitations were placed on the gathering of the field data by the sex of the author (he was allowed only superficial contact with Kwoma females) and his overall position as a "foreigner" to the group which affected his ability to gather data on the first three months of infancy because of the Kwoma's fear of sorcery. Source 2: Whiting, which should be read as a supplement to 1: Whiting, gives insights into various kinds of field situations encountered and elucidates the character of certain informants. It is, however, too disorganized to present a full ethnographic picture of Kwoma culture.

This file should be used with caution by the researcher not only for the reasons given above in regard to the author's

relationship to the people, but also because of the relatively short term in the field of the investigatior (Sept. 1936-May 1937), and the fact that at the present time there is no confirmatory data by other ethnologists on the cultural information gathered by Whiting. In general the file covers socialization processes, material culture, religion, and kinship quite well, but provides no information on political organization or culture history. The file was processed between 1971 and 1974.]